



# NEPAL

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# TIME AND SPACE IN TANTRIC ART

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## Introduction

Tantric traditions,<sup>1</sup> having evolved from local belief-systems that were accretions of the worship of village deities, survived in distinct forms in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. After the decline of tantra in Kashmir and the rise of Bhakti-oriented movements in other parts of India, multiple tantric traditions waned. The Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, which is the northern boundary of the Indian subcontinent, preserved unique tantric practices that were extinguished elsewhere. This occurred not only because of its invincible geological barriers, but also because of the Malla kings who founded the unique fusion of the Hindu Vedic system with Shakta tantric traditions. For about a millennium, the Newar community, under the rule of Malla kings, developed a unique style of art and architecture that is vibrant in its artistic nature. Here, multiple forms of artistic and philosophical symbols conjoin in a richly esoteric representation. Nepalese tantric art, on one hand, is singular in its aesthetic vision, while on the other, it is an extension of the widespread tantric heritage that stretched from Bengal in the east to Kashmir in the west, and from the Himalaya in the north to the ocean in the south. In this essay, our quest is to understand tantric art in general, using examples of Newar paintings that synthesize aesthetic beauty with components of traditional religious practice.

The richly symbolic art of South Asian tantra remains vibrantly alive in the form of mandalas and sculptures. This potent alliance of visual structure and symbolism has attracted several contemporary scholars to examine and interpret these phenomena. Nevertheless, an understanding built upon the framework of the tradition that developed this artwork is for the most part missing in the overwhelmingly Eurocentric analysis. Our approach will be to analyse these arts from the perspective of classical Indian thought, primarily the Trika Shaiva doctrine. We will also consider the points raised by the practitioners of these mandalas as expressed in their descriptions of tantric art.

Mandalas, geometric designs that are utilized for the visualization of deities, emerged in their early form in the Vedic rituals performed around fire altars.<sup>2</sup> These basic designs developed into more complex forms in the later Vedic rituals such as Agnichayana, which is among the structural precursors to tantric mandalas. In these early rituals, the mandala served to mediate between the mundane world and the cosmic worlds of the deities through the symbols of sacred time and space.<sup>3</sup> This essay considers the deep structure of time and space found in the ritual art of the mandala.

<sup>1</sup> Guhyakali, depicting multiple layers of time and space. Zimmerman Collection, photograph courtesy Jack Zimmerman.

Classical Indian literature dealing with art or architecture highlights the details of the principal designs with very little explication of their meaning.<sup>4</sup> Tantric literature, in contrast, explores the basic principles that underlie these structures. This article thus also investigates meanings found in the art of the mandala from the perspective of tantric literature.

### The Artist

The artist defines himself in relation to the artwork he creates. For mandalas, a particular design is most often a collaborative work of the tantric practitioner who visualizes the design and the professional artist who materializes the visions and concepts of the yogin into the mandala. In some instances, even the materialization of the conceptual framework requires a set of artists. In this case, "the artist" represents all these collaborators, including the first architect, the designer.

Two aspects in the development of mandalas warrant examination: first, a mandala represents complex concepts inscribed by practitioners at different times over hundreds of years; second, a mandala is a simulacrum with multiple, similar mandalas emerging with different implications. Srichakra, for example, embodies different ritualistic phases developed over the course of time.<sup>5</sup> In this context, "the artist" is not a specific figure who creates a particular mandala, but rather the dynamic mind that evolves over the course of the mandala's history of construction and visualization.

After manifesting the painting or sculpture, the artist "dissolves" into the art, denying his separate identity. There is no artist's signature, nothing identifying a particular maker. He does not intend to be the "creator" of the "object" created "outside" his mind. The painting or sculptural object then receives the ritual act of life installation, and transforms into the divinity itself. The artist is no longer the creator of that mandala, but rather a devotee of the divine. Unlike one devotee who offers his life in meditation upon a single mandala, the artist does not rely solely on one image; he instead demonstrates the constant stream of creativity

and accepts himself as an instrument for its manifestation. Using the metaphor of Shiva as an artist, the world becomes his painting, made visible with the brush of his desire, with he himself being the canvas, the perceiver, and admirer of that artwork.<sup>6</sup> The mandala, then, is a microcosm of the world, and the artist its lord and creator.

This also explains why traditional artists remain hidden within their artwork, rarely identified as a particular artist or maker. The artist knows that he metaphorically resides within the artwork, where, denying his individuality while simultaneously an instrument to manifest the divine form, he assumes his divinity preserved in the art. The self-awareness of the artist matches that of the practitioner: both envision their identity as divine, not merely confined within their human form.

The artist alone directs his creativity,<sup>7</sup> this autonomy designated as the intuitional power (*pratibha*), the potency to manifest objects outside of the mind. This very *pratibha* is the power of autonomy superimposed upon the order of manifest objects.<sup>8</sup> *Pratibha*, the precondition for creativity and simultaneously its inherent power, equals the pure illumination of consciousness from which *udyoga* (effort) manifests, replete with will, knowledge, and action.<sup>9</sup> Although *pratibha* resides beyond the sequence of time or space, its manifestation rests upon sequence (*krama*),<sup>10</sup> in a dyad of time and space.<sup>11</sup>

According to tantras, the deity and the practitioner are identical in their true nature. Tantric art mediates the ordinary realm of experience in which the artist or practitioner remains bound and perceives himself as different from the divinity, within the succession of time and space. For the artist who also practises the teachings of a specific mandala, the geometric form or emanation of the central deity is but his own self-portrait. *Bindu*, the drop at the centre of the mandala, represents the self in its unitary form, while the complete mandala depicts the self in its immanence. The singularity and plurality of the self are but two aspects of the same reality, with artists depicting the latter.

"Mandala" is a portrait of the self, corresponding to a single body, with the divine body identical to the body of the yogin. Some mandalas contain complete mandalas nested within them, congruent with different limbs of the



2  
Sri Yantra (*The Art of Tantra*,  
Philip Rawson, p. 76, figure 56).





yogin, while other mandalas show various deities and yogins within the single mandala, demonstrating how micro- and macrocosm intersect and interweave. Infinite forms of mandalas depict the infinitude of self-manifestation possible in both manifest and latent forms, its potency remaining in the primordial form of *pratibha*, creativity.

### The Mandala

The world as mandala is the expression of the cosmic power residing in Shiva, who is pure, unindividuated consciousness. A mandala as a painting is the depiction of the world that is not different from Shiva personified. It is the extension of that very *pratibha* now residing as individualized consciousness in the heart of the artist.<sup>12</sup> Mandalas are of two forms: the deity mandala and geometric mandala. The deity mandala gives anthropomorphic form to the deity internalized in the ritual practice of visualization; this process highlights the body as complete and divine, with various gestures and postures representing different modes of consciousness that manifest in the sequence of time and space. The ritual mandala consists of various geometric forms, with the triangle, square, differently-petalled lotuses, and circles manifesting the family of a particular deity. All deities in the periphery emanate from the central deity.

Since the world is the manifest form of the Self, the mandala depicts the world, with all 36 categories located within it. A mandala, as a symbolic language expressing the matrix of time, reveals the three paths of time designated in terms of letters, words, and mantras; as a blueprint of the cosmos, it represents space in its threefold manifestation of the limiting factors (*kala*), categories (*tattva*), and cosmic worlds (*bhuvana*). Fundamentally, different categories are visualized in the course of meditation on a specific mandala.

The Self is consciousness in itself,<sup>13</sup> autonomous in manifesting the world upon itself,<sup>14</sup> as an image is painted on a canvas.<sup>15</sup> This consciousness assumes *krama*, or sequence, as it gradually unfolds in the form of astral and physical worlds.<sup>16</sup> The sequence of consciousness

manifesting in the form of the world is depicted in an individual as the four stages of waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and transcendent awareness. In the cosmic order, this sequence is described in terms of creation, sustenance, contraction, and the nameless state. The tantric tradition primarily focuses on the fifth state as beyond transcendence.<sup>17</sup> The geometric shapes – square, *bindu*, triangle, or circle – are analysed in terms of states of consciousness. Tantra focuses on the sequence of awareness within the triad of subject, object, and knowledge that manifests in the four stages of consciousness. This manifests as twelve levels of awareness, generally depicted as twelve petals of a lotus.<sup>18</sup>

In accordance with the idea that time and space govern the entire realm of existence, mantras belong to the sphere of time, while the cosmic worlds are the extension of consciousness in space. The mandala represents this in microcosmic form. Consciousness alone is the supreme reality, with time and space its modifications. The deity mandala highlights the “pure consciousness” aspect, with reality in the form of the world, whereas the geometric mandalas stress the immanence of the Absolute. Time and space manifest in multiple spheres, demonstrated primarily in the power circles of the mandala. These cosmic centres of power are invoked in the ritual mandala in a specific time and space to awaken the sleeping dormant forces identified within its configuration.

From its earliest manifestation, the mandala utilizes the structure of a family (*kula*), stressing that the deities never emerge alone and are always shown in a circle. Deities residing in the external square of the mandala represent space, whereas the inner layers represent time in the triangular forms. The centre or the “drop” (*bindu*) is the deity in its pure essence, uniting the mother and father aspects as well as time and space. The multiplicity of deities reveals a structure of power governing the limited structure of time and space, its plurality reciprocal to the consciousness manifest in accordance with the object and subject of experience.

### *Bindu*: The Cosmic Centre

The tantric mandala is an expansion of the *bindu* (drop) into the periphery. In this process, the drop splits into two, red and white; the drop emerges into “emission” (*visarga*).<sup>19</sup> When united with the

*bindu*, this *visarga* gives rise to a triangle. This is the very one from which emerges the dichotomy of red and white, the *visarga* of mother and father principles. This bipolar coexistence unites with the original oneness, manifesting the unending flow of the movement of two into one, and then the outward movement of primordial awareness into the dichotomy of subject and object, of consciousness and matter. The extension of a drop is a circle, always depicted in a mandala within a square, manifesting the extension of space. The mandala culminates in the *bindu* and the *bindu* unfolds into the mandala. The tradition of Tripura teaches a sixfold meditation inside the *bindu*, with another mandala apparent within it, demonstrating two dimensions of the inner and external expansion of *bindu*. The inner extension can be compared with subjective time and space, while the external extension of *bindu* manifests as commonly perceived space and time.<sup>20</sup>

This twofold process of introversion and extroversion underlies the construction of mantras. The first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet *a* is understood as a drop from which all letters emerge and dissolve. Mantras consist of varied combinations of fifty letters, which in turn emanate from the first letter. The first letter is known as *anuttara* (transcendent),<sup>21</sup> whereas the last letter *h* is known as *visarga*. All the other letters are expansions of *bindu* and *visarga*. The *bindu* is depicted as white and *visarga* as red; these two colours play the role of the male and female principle in a mandala.

Consciousness manifests in a dichotomy of sound and light, with mantra the sound form, and mandala the light form. The aspect of sound is the manifestation of time, and mandala, the visual representation of light, is the manifestation of space. The existence of time and space presupposes consciousness, because in the absence of consciousness, no experience is possible, and entities cannot be proven without having them experienced. *Bindu*, as consciousness in subjective expression and a drop in objective manifestation, is the blueprint of both subjective and objective modifications in accordance with time and space. The subjective and objective are combined: in the absence of awareness, no world can be confirmed; in the absence of a drop, no mandala is possible.

Thus the *bindu* is the autonomous subject<sup>22</sup> which gives rise to mandala<sup>23</sup> when the *bindu*

desires by its own power to manifest in a particular form.<sup>24</sup> The *bindu*, as unmanifest form, retains the potency of all forms, and when manifest in a particular form, becomes a particular mandala. The *bindu* is the abstracted form of time and space in which both are identical. *Bindu* is the transcendent (*anuttara*), unitary form of red and white, of light and reflection, as well as the seminal drop that in a yogin flows upward during transformation. In this last sense, *bindu* is *parama-sukha*, extreme bliss.<sup>25</sup>

The *bindu* is the latent form of *kundalini*; when the *bindu* pulsates, the *kundalini* rises. At the centre of the mandala, *bindu* metaphorically represents the sun in the cosmos. As planets move around the sun, the inner and external senses move around the seminal drop. The yogin transcends the limitations of time and space by residing in the state of this very drop. Notions of mind and individuality arise when the *bindu* vibrates; time and space subsequently appear. *Bindu*, the subjective awareness, has the inherent potency to manifest all forms. The *bindu* multiplies infinitely by itself, with all space as its extension, its singularity embodying its plurality.

The extension of the *bindu* into the form of a circle is empty space, the locus wherein all entities exist. As the centre of the mandala, the *bindu* is consciousness in itself, addressed as the sky or the void of consciousness.<sup>26</sup> This space is all pervading, depicted in the mandala as the square or circle that delimits the outer boundary. Srichakra symbolizes space in a reverse order to the Buddhist Kalachakra: in the former the circle resides inside the square, whereas in the latter, the square rests within the circle. The meaning is the same: space pervades all that exists. In a mandala, there is no imagery beyond this boundary, because everything that exists is within it.

In Newar-style mandala painting, the underlying philosophy of infinite *bindus* emerging from a single *bindu* and the painting method merge: the mandala consists of myriad drops, painted one after another. The brush of the painter systematically applies the colour to a specific place, embodying the touch of the artist in one point at one moment of application, each drop in itself the complete universe. Some deity

mandalas detail a complete deity within a single crown ornament. This crowning point is the centre of consciousness within which the entire universe abides. Thus, in painting a single drop, the artist also paints the complete mandala.

Some contemporary scholars stress that the square and circle are the root matrices of formal structures underlying artistic creations.<sup>27</sup> From the tantric perspective, the square and circle are not the primordial structure, but rather are the fully manifest forms of the inner structures revealed in each drop of paint. When the *bindu* pulsates, it assumes a curved form. The curve is the divine resonance (*nada*), generally depicted as a half-circle that signifies its wave-form. Metaphorically, these two aspects of *bindu* and *nada* represent respectively Shiva and Shakti, or the male and female principles.

#### The Image of Time and Space

The two tantric deities that most clearly elucidate time and space are Kali, the mistress of time, and Bhuvaneshwari, mistress of the world. Kali, the feminine form of time who transcends all sequence, is terrifying in appearance, whereas Bhuvaneshwari is beautiful. These images are not static, but dynamically evolving in more complex forms of wrath and beauty. The horrific form of Kali culminates in the Kali that transcends the wheel of succession and resides in her immanent and transcendent form,<sup>28</sup> whereas the beautiful form culminates in Mahatripurasundari. Kali, the mistress of time, is depicted as a black deity, while Bhuvaneshwari is shown as red. The application of black and red colours as corresponding to these deities suggests that the ritual use of colours is representative of the categories of time and space that have infinite configurations.

This description evokes some essential concepts underlying colour distribution. Space and time can be visualized as the male and female principles, with time located in space, envisioned as the familiar Kali image astride Shiva. But this is not a fixed image. Shiva manifests in time as the Mahakala forms, whereas Shakti's emanation in space manifests as Bhuvaneshwari, discussed above. All these depictions of time and space

share a similar use of colour. The familiar image of Shiva's family depicts Shakti in red, seated on the lap of Shiva, who is shown in white. As light or *prakasha*, Shiva is white in colour, whereas the feminine power deity is regarded as reflection or *vimarsha*, with *vimarsha* depicted as red.

Kamakala is visualized as three drops, white, red, and black in colour. Frequently, black is replaced with the mixed colour of white and red. This triad is the primordial creative force that underlies the fundamental structure of the world, and the depiction of mandala employs this triadic use and meaning of colour.<sup>29</sup>

A single deity manifests all phases of life in a single day, depicted as red in the morning, white during the day, the colour of smoke during the evening, and all colours late at night. This distribution of colour is clearly visible on the faces of the deities and is also expressed through their garments. This sequence is common to the Tripurasundari and other major deity practices such as Kubjika or Kali. The later Brahmanic tradition of Gayatri practice has applied this method of visualizing a single deity in different forms in a single day. Five fundamental principles are depicted with the addition of two more colours, yellow and green. Whether the mandala is of the five Buddhas, or of the five faces of Shiva, the structure an artist follows is the same. The basic alignment of seven colours with seven Matrikas symbolically relates colour to specific deities, with colour seen as the extension of light. In a mandala, 360 rays concentrate into different centres. In the six-chakra system, the number of rays is divided into different chakras, whereas in other mandalas, the rays are distributed in different layers of a single mandala.

Specific aspects of the divinity depict both the beauty of space and the wrath of time, giving rise to wrathful beauty, which can be visualized in images of Durga. Her beauty transcends erotic desire, and sexual lust is depicted as the buffalo-headed demon beneath her feet. She is the eternal virgin, possessing such strength that none can defeat her to make her a bride.<sup>30</sup> Durga is the highest embodiment of space and time; her form depicts the beautiful aspect of space, whereas her gestures, vehicle, and surrounding circle of flames represent ferocious time. "Durga" is etymologically closer to the deities of space (from *durga* meaning fort) and mythologically an embodiment of the unified power of all deities.



Depicted surrounded by flames that indicate time (*kalagni*), she is fundamentally a deity associated with space, transcending the black demonic time throbbing with lust.

The richly complex structure of the Guhyakali Mandala gives form to symbolic layers of time. "Cremation grounds" in the empty areas surrounding the mandala demonstrate the outermost sphere of time, where "time" is experienced in death itself. The surrounding "door-keeping" deities delimit the expansion of

space. Without the delimitation of space or definition of a boundary, creation does not occur, whether on the physical plane or in the astral world. The mandala, therefore, defines the space of the astral world, through which the individuality of a practitioner is merged into divine experience. This limitation is measured

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Guhyakali Yantra (*Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, Madhu Khanna, p. 151, figure 81).











through Matrikas (the measuring deities), who are subordinate to the spiral of time in this mandala. The central deity, Guhyakali, governs "unrevealed time". *Dikpalas*, depicted in the layer immediately surrounding this deity, symbolize divine space as not "elsewhere", separate from the sphere that is ordinarily perceived; rather, this sphere transcends the common notion of space. The vertical, visual folds of deities, therefore, not only symbolize an elevation in internal time, but also demonstrate sanctified space in the ascending layer governed by deities with higher consciousness.

The central deity, Guhyakali, rests atop a pyramid of deities with gradually ascending levels of consciousness. They do not gradually extend into space, since all of them manifest at once in a single moment, and all exist together. The lowest sphere is made of *manus*, the semi-divine beings in each *kalpa*. *Dikpalas* ride elevated above the *manus*, an indication of a higher realm of time and space. An infinite number of lower-sphere beings are encompassed within the subjective notion of the higher-sphere being. Each is created by its immediate, higher-stage being, and those in the same layer also have their own gradual order of extension in time and space. Five deities, or five *pretas*, are generally depicted as a vehicle of the central goddess, Kali, or Tripura, or any other major deity. Yet among these, a hierarchy of deities emerges, with Mahakala, Manthana, or Nirvanabhairava identified as the highest form of time upon which the goddess rides. Guhyakali is also shown embracing, or being embraced by, her consort Bhairava. This spiral visualization with hierarchical divinities merging into flame symbolizes that *kalagni*, or the fire of time, becomes one with *chidagni*, the fire of awareness, in this highest state of awareness. Successive stages of time and space depict their extension from a commonly perceived ground to awareness in itself. The Guhyakali image culminates in flame, with Kalasankarshini, the highest deity in the sequence, who consumes time within herself and who is envisioned solely as a flame.

*Kala* (time) and *krama* (sequence) are interrelated. The *krama* deities are worshipped in a wheel divided into twelve, with every deity manifesting in her own mandala of twelve deities.

4 (opposite)  
Mandala of the Sun God.  
Photograph courtesy John Ford.

5  
Subtle Body and Cosmic Man.  
Photograph courtesy Navin Kumar.

The extension of the wheel of Kali gives rise to 144 emanations of Kali, twelve deities multiplied by twelve deities. Each of these foundational deities contains a complete mandala of the twelve-fold succession, with every aspect replicating the cosmic representation within itself. The internal strata of this wheel of time are complex, and the yogin practises it to experience modifications of Kali in all these emanations which are lustful to consume time.

The visualization of time as divine is found in the iconic form of Kali, which in *krama* categories, range from the Kali depicting creation (Srishtikali) to the Kali depicting the nameless state of an extremely horrific manifestation of the twelfth deity. This interpretation follows the *krama* doctrine according to which the deities manifest in a sequence and are immanent. Mahartha doctrine, on the other hand, advocates transcendence of the deity, according to which the supreme deity is the thirteenth manifestation. In both cases, the deities manifest successively in more and more horrific forms. The external beauty, according to this perspective, is a momentary manifestation which dissolves in the inner beauty of self-awareness. There are several etymological derivations of the term Kali, all designating different modifications of time, and all fundamentally derived from *kalana*, pulsating. Meditation upon these aspects of time is common to the father deity of Bhairava or Kala, as well as to Kali, the mother deity. Since *prakasha* or light is the aspect of father, and *vimarsha* or reflection is the aspect of mother, the father-practice of Bhairava focuses on light or the awareness-aspect of time, whereas in the mother practice, reflection is the predominant mode.

All deities emanate from and rest upon the heart of the yogin.<sup>31</sup> Mental modifications of a yogin lead to the manifestation of a particular deity, whereas an ordinary human being understands his/her experience as merely mundane. Tantric art portrays beauty as divine, depicting different mental modifications as divine forms. Guhyakali, or the deity of esoteric-time, and Kamakalakali, the Kali in the form of all aspects of desire, are two basic strata supporting time visualized in the form of divinity.

### Static and Dynamic Aspects of Time

The mandala embodies both static and dynamic aspects of time and space in its synchronic and diachronic manifestations. The sun mandala, for instance, represents the entire solar system, including the zodiac and all constellations, with their centre and periphery shown as revolving around the sun. This mandala is a yogic version of the physical plane, with the sun representing the seminal drop at the centre, from which the mandala arises. However, the stable phases of all constellations or stars are specific modes which scarcely occur in the entire life of a solar system. A mandala resembles the solar system, assuming the central deity as the sun. When compared to the sun mandala, deity mandalas are also in dynamic flux. What is remarkable is that the centre, static with regard to its periphery, is dynamic in itself. The sun rides a chariot driven by seven horses, a depiction of dynamism.

While the sun mandala is very explicit, this is not the only mandala associated with the solar system. Tripurasundari is praised as an embodiment of all constellations, planets, zodiacs, and stars.<sup>32</sup> All the manuals of meditation start with installation of all constellations and stars in their mantra form, paralleling the way Tripurasundari manifests within the body. Thus the solar system is equated with the deity of meditation, which is also the body of the practitioner. A yogin envisions his movements as the movements of the stars and constellations, and in this meditation, the complete universe is condensed in a single body of the practitioner.

However, this is merely one structure of the manifestation of time. Different time cycles are depicted within a single mandala. For example, in the Guhyakali Mandala, the time cycles depicted are those of the *manus*, *dikpalas*, and the five *pretas*.<sup>33</sup> Above this cycle lies Mahakala, upon which dances Kali. As Guhyakali, she is depicted with one or more jackals surrounding her. The presence of jackals suggests the isolated cremation ground, while their sound approximates the seed mantra of Guhyakali.

### Time and Eternity

Since tantra regards the supreme deity as unbound by time or space, the goddess assumes by her own free will a multitude of forms bound within time and space. The deities meditated upon in each lunar day are different, gradually



developing from the first day to the day of the full moon, with the order of meditation reversed during the dark half of the lunar cycle. In some *krama* tantra practices, this dark half of the lunar sequence is filled with deities of the Kali order.

Deities of each aspect of the day are in the form of *nityas*, eternal deities emanating in a sequence following the lunar calendar and dissolving into the central deity. Other *samaya* deities evolve in a specific time sequence transcending the sequence of *nityas*. Above these *samaya* deities, a higher level of time and space is meditated upon in the form of the *nityas*. The *krama* doctrine underlies the notion that the liberation of a yogin is to be in the centre of these successive layers and simultaneously the witnessing self of all that is evolving around it.

#### Internal and External Time

Time and space, according to tantra, are twofold: internal and external. External time is commonly experienced by all, but inner time is what a yogin experiences when entering his own *pranic* states. Since the deities are visualized as manifested in time, for the meditating yogin intent upon experiencing the complete extension of the self in all possible realms, he needs to travel through inner time and inner space. Inner time coincides with outer time, except that the entire time cycle occurs within a single day of a yogin, with all dissolution and creation occurring within each breath, just as external time and space manifests and dissolves with each inhalation and exhalation of the supreme deity. The supreme deity is of the nature of autonomous pulsation in which the worlds are created and dissolved. The wheel of mandala depicts the reality that this pulsation is within the yogin who has been awakened. A mandala represents the most external phase of time in its outermost circle, moving gradually towards inner time depicted in the centre. All levels of time are experienced simultaneously in one instant, in a single mandala within the mind of a yogin.

All the *bhuvanas* (cosmic worlds) are meditated upon in the same way within the body of a yogin. Common puranic and tantric concepts regard the cosmic worlds as seven ascending and seven descending, beginning from the earth outwards in spiral form. Tantric cosmology favours 118 or 224 cosmic worlds, and mandalas depict different sets of cosmic worlds embracing



the body of a yogin. A common tantric mandala depicts a yogin riding a tortoise which in turn rides a frog that is standing on two cosmic eggs of red and white colours as the lower seat of Kundalini, representing the mother and father principles, which in the awakened form is visualized above the thousand-petalled lotus. The cosmic body depicted with deities that represent the aspects into which a mantra is divisible, possesses twelve or sixteen levels. The highest state is *unmana* or "beyond the mind". The sequence of deities ending with the transcendent mind symbolizes that the mind is constructed of a matrix based upon time and space within sequence; here, a yogin manifests himself in different worlds. He liberates only when he rises above the wheel of succession.

From the perspective of a practitioner, the perception of mandala is comparable to the perception of one's own body. In the awakened state of mind, there is no limitation of time and space causing a yogin to perceive things separate from himself. Therefore, in viewing the mandala,

6  
A mandala with mandalas  
within: Bagalamukhi Mandala.  
(*Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of  
Cosmic Unity*, Madhu Khanna,  
p. 126, figure 67).

he perceives himself, because for a yogin, time and space are not "outside"; these are within his own mind. Since the mandala governs the complete extension of time and space, it is neither "outside" nor "inside"; it is just the body of the yogin. This leads to the premise that the desire to depict beauty in the mandala is to preserve the beauty a yogin perceives in seeing all worlds within himself. This experience of beauty does not come through denial of one's manifestation in the world; the mandala preserves the innate beauty within the very perceiver, who also is the admirer of the artwork. The real art, therefore, is a construction of the perceiver, who sees beauty within the object, and while admiring it, evokes his own true nature through the language of art. The world is painted within the mind of the yogin, with colour and design the expression of his mental modifications. That which can be painted is not the latent force, *pratibha*, but that which is painted illuminates the hidden *pratibha*.

#### Aesthetic and Divine

According to the texts and practices of tantra, aesthetic and spiritual experiences are identical. Thus the dichotomy of mundane and supramundane, immanent and transcendent, phenomenal and real, dissolve in the mandala reality. Experiences such as compassion, delusion, or hunger are aspects of divinity. Tripurasundari is also called Kameshwari, the mistress of *kama*.<sup>34</sup> *Kama* is both passion and will. As passion, it signifies erotic desire; however, as volition, this dormant force underlying the self makes consciousness aware of something. Durga, the space-governing deity, is invoked as memory, wisdom, and compassion,<sup>35</sup> the deity being the persona of the qualities that define one's individuality. The presence of these properties in the individual mind is the presence of the deity, while their absence indicates possession by demonic forces. Tripura is associated with the deity mandala of the deities that attract desire, mind, memory, endurance, and so forth.<sup>36</sup> Since all emotions are associated with one or another deity, every impression or feeling manifests divinity.

Tantric art invokes mental states that correspond to certain deities. The closer one gets

to these mental modes through aesthetic experience, the closer he gets to divine experience. From the tantric perspective, self-realization is nothing other than the purely aesthetic experience in the ecstatic mode, with desire in itself as divine.

The extension of desire in space is Kamakala, which in Kali form, manifests the sequence of time as an embodiment of passion. Thus, space expands as the extroversion of desire, with time explicit within it as the inner controller of desire. Although extended in space, desire is experienced in time, in a single moment. In the expanse of space, desire manifests in the form of Tripura, and while in the mode of time, Kamakali is visualized atop a crescent moon, resembling Guhyakali in her form and gesture. This form of Kali is ecstasy herself, where erotic passion mingles with the fear of death.

These beautiful and horrific forms of Kamakala represent day and night. The first depiction of Kamakala contains the rising sun, always with the brilliance of infinite stars, whereas the second is shown as black and hiding the moon. This twofold imagery parallels that found in the yogic body, with two channels representing the sun and moon, on the right and left side, while indicating *prana* and *apana*. In Kamakala's lustful gestures, desire masks death lurking within, whereas in her horrific image, unending bliss is concealed. She is thus both concealing illusion and illuminating wisdom.

Erotic experience presupposes an external object to receive pleasure. But for the yogin meditating on Kamakala, all instances are erotic. When the mind of a yogin remains free from objects, he is in the state of *brahman*, while every instance of thought is indulgence.

The traditional metaphor for consciousness is fire (*chidagni*), identical with erotic desire (*kamagni*). This same fire extends into time and space as *kama*, whereas dissolution into its pure nature is *chidagni*. The objects of *kamagni* are external, whereas the objects of the fire of awareness (*samvidagni*) are internal or mental entities. The first unfolds the entities outwards whereas the next dissolves them within. These two fires of passion and awareness replicate the divine opening and closing of eyelids, which is the manifestation and contraction of the world. The fire of awareness subsides with the offering of internal objects, and when all are consumed,



*prakasha* (light) shines forth. In the fire of consciousness, subject and object arise and dissolve together. The face of Kalasankarshini, pure flame, is the fundamental principle, consciousness in itself, which is the origin of passionate desire for objects identical with a paradoxical volition to transcend it. In Srichakra, Kameshwari resides in a triangle directly outside the central *bindu* of Mahatripurasundari. In the case of Kamakala in the Kali tradition, she is higher than other forms of Kali, but she too immolates in fire, transforming into Mahachandayogeshwari.

Passionate desire manifests within the *rasa* experience. As a single consciousness assumes the forms of all concepts, or as a single deity manifests in the form of mandala, so too, a single *rasa* manifests in various forms. A single thought assumes its own world of time and space within, identical to a single *rasa* that embodies subsidiary modifications. When these manifest outwards in the mundane world, the common aesthetic experience results, and when merging with the heart, it becomes the yogic experience.

Unmanifest *rasa* is the true nature of the self. A specific configuration of consciousness emerges as a deity, in itself the expression of a particular *rasa*. The experience of *rasa* depends upon time and space, but when identical with the inner nature of experience, this is divine, and yogins realize it through the mandala. This is not “outside”, but rather lies in oneself, with the outer conditions and elements stimulating the unmanifest form of *rasa*, which is the aesthetic experience.

#### GLOSSARY

apana = apāna  
 Bhuvaneshwari = Bhuvaneśvarī  
 chakra = cakra  
 Dikpala = Dikpālā  
 Durga = Durgā  
 Gayatri = Gāyatrī  
 Guhyakali = Guhyakālī  
 Kalachakra = Kālacakra  
 Kalagni = Kālāgni  
 Kalana = Kalanā  
 Kalasankarshini = Kālasaṅkarṣiṇī  
 Kali = Kālī  
 Kama = Kāma  
 Kamagni = Kāmāgni  
 Kamakala = Kāmakalā

Kubjika = Kubjikā  
 Kundalini = Kuṇḍalinī  
 Mahachandayogeshwari = Mahācandayogeśvarī  
 Mahatripurasundari = Mahātripurasundarī  
 Mahakala = Mahākālā  
 Mahārtha = Mahārtha  
 Mandala = Maṇḍala  
 Matrika = Mātṛkā  
 Nada = Nāda  
 Nirvanabhairava = Nirvāṇabhairava  
 Nitya = Nityā  
 Prakasha = Prakāśa  
 Prana = Prāṇa  
 Pratibha = Pratibhā  
 Samaya = Samayā  
 Shaiva = Śaiva  
 Shakti = Śakti  
 Srichakra = Śrīcakra  
 Sristikali = Sṛṣṭikālī  
 Tripurasundari = Tripurasundarī  
 Unmana = Unmanā  
 Vimarsha = Vimarśa  
 Vishnu = Viṣṇu

#### NOTES

The Sanskrit terms in the body of the essay are without diacritical marks. For precision of language, see the glossary.

1. Even though the fundamental principles concerning time in Hindu and Buddhist tantras are nearly identical, we focus primarily on Hindu tantras.
2. The description of Tripurā in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (ŚB 6.3.3.24–25) represents the early maṇḍala concept. Early forts seem to incorporate the maṇḍala concept (Parpola 194–95). The ŚB (10.5.2) describes Maṇḍalapuruṣopāśana, or visualization of the *puruṣa* in maṇḍala.
3. ŚB (6.3.3.24–25) relates maṇḍala with space. *Pur*, city, plays a central role in subsequent tantric symbolism, Tripurā being the primordial divinity. ŚB's identification of *mṛtyu*, death, as the sun, and the self or *puruṣa* (ŚB 10.5.2.3–4), on the other hand, highlights the aspect of time in the maṇḍala.
4. Texts such as *Citrasūtra* give precise details of the paintings, whereas others, including the *Mayamata*, *Mānasāra*, and *Śilparatna* focus on Indian architecture. Considered representative texts, they primarily concentrate on proportional precision, with less

emphasis on the concepts that undergird the models they are describing. However, reading these texts nonetheless reveals the primacy of time and space as the matrix of the images and structures.

5. Differences in the living traditions of Hayagrīva, Ānandabhairava, and Dakṣiṇāmūrti give a glimpse of the variety found in the ritual worship of Śrīcakra.
6. *Jagaccitraṃ samālikhya svecchātūlikayātmani/ svayam eva samālokyā prīṇāti bhagavān śivāḥ//*
7. The fundamental principle of the Trika Śaiva doctrines is that the Absolute Śiva is autonomous in manifesting the world; he does not need any external impulse, material, or instrumental elements to create it. In the case of an artist, he requires external elements which become the “ground” or support of the art, like the stone used to make an image. But when art is complete, the external elements become subordinate. If one admires a painting, one is not admiring the canvas or the colours.
8. *Yā caiṣā pratibhā tattatpadārthakramarūṣitā/ akramānantacidrūpaḥpramātā sa maheśvaraḥ//* (ĪP 1.7.1).
9. *Kriyājñānecchodyogapratibhāsvabhāvaṣṣṭi- sthitisamhārānākhyābhāsāsvārūpatayā niṣkṛṣyante Mahārthamañjarī-Parimala* (MMP, on verse 39).
10. *Svātantryaśaktiḥ kramasamśiṣṭā, kramātmātā ceti vibhor vibhūtiḥ/tadeva devītrayam antar āstām, anyttaraṃ me prathayet svarūpam//* (TĀ 1.5).
11. *Mūrtivaicitryato deśakramam ābhāsavyatyasau/ kriyāvaicitryanirbhāsāt kālakramam apīśvaraḥ//* (ĪP 2.1.5).
12. *Yadā sā paramāśaktiḥ svecchayā viśvarūpiṇi/ sphurattām ātmanaḥ paśyet tadā cakrasya saṃbhavaḥ//* *Yoginīhṛdaya* (YH 1.9-10).
13. *Caitanyam ātmā* (ŚŚ 1.1).
14. *Citiḥ svatantrā viśvasiddhihetu* (PH 1).
15. *Svecchayāḥ svabhittau viśvam unmīlayati* (PH 2).
16. *Tan nānā anurūpagrāhyagrāhakabhedāt* (PH 3).
17. *Jāgrat, svapna, suṣupti, and turīya* are the four stages found in Upaniṣadic and tantric literature. However, tantric texts and practices focus on the fifth stage, *turīyātīta*, which is beyond the fourth. Some tantras mention even further stages such as *sarvātīta*, or “that which transcends all”.
18. *Anuttarānandacitir icchāśaktau niyojitā/trikoṇam iti tat prāhur visargānandasundaram//meyamāt-pramāmānaprasaraiḥ sankucatprabham/śṅgāṭarūpam āpannam icchājñānakriyātmakam//* (Parātrīṃśikā).

19. *Sitaśoṇabinduyugalaṃ viviktaśivaśaktisakucatprasaram/vāgarthasṛṣṭihetuḥ parasparānupraviṣṭavispaṣṭam//* (KKV 6).
20. *Kālo dvidhātra vijñeyāḥ sauraś cādhyātmikāḥ priye/Svacchandatantra* 7.2. . . . *kālo dvidhā ity ekarūpo 'pi bāhyābhyanataratayā saṃsthitāḥ* . . . Uddyota of Kṣemarāja upon *Svacchandatantra* 7.2.
21. Abhinavagupta gives sixteenfold meanings of *anuttara* in *Paratīrīṃśikāvivarāṇa*, 1.
22. The state of *vidikriyāyām svatantraḥ* (one free in the act of knowing) rests upon awareness as the cosmic centre, which is depicted as a drop in ritual maṇḍalas.
23. *Yadā sā paramā śaktiḥ svecchayā viśvarūpiṇi/ sphurattām ātmanaḥ paśyet tadā cakrasya saṃbhavaḥ//* (*Yoginīhṛdaya* 1.9-10).
24. *Bindor vikasanarūpaṃ śrīcakram nāma vakatum udyame*. Cidvallī of Naṭanāndanātha in KKV 9.
25. For erotic and esoteric applications of *bindu*, see *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 236-45.
26. Terms such as *cidākāśa*, *cidgagana*, *cidvyoman* are frequent in texts such as *Vijñānabhairava*, *Cidgaganacandrikā* of Śrīvatsa, *Cidvilāstava* of Amṛtānanda, besides other texts. This usage needs to be closely analysed in relation to Buddhist and Śaiva usage of *śūnya* and *śūnyatā*.
27. Kapila Vatsyayan, *The Square and the Circle of the Indian Arts*.
28. *Mahābhairavacaṇḍograghorakālī*, for instance, is the twelfth stage, where the succession culminates. Abhinavagupta, however, prefers the *Mahārtha* system that advocates transcendence of the wheel by Kālī with the thirteenth form of Kālasaṅkarṣiṇī.
29. *Mātā mānaṃ meyaṃ bindutrāyabhinnaḥbījarūpāṇi/ dhāmatrayapīṭhatrayaśaktitrayabhedabhāvitāny api ca// teṣu krameṇa līngatritayam tadvacca mātṛkātrītayam/ itthaṃ tritayapurī yā turīyapīṭhādibhedinī vidyā//* (KKV 13-14).
30. This description follows the *Devīmāhātmya*, Chapter 5.
31. In Chapter 4 of *The Triadic Heart of Shiva*, “The heart as ultimate reality”, Paul Muller-Ortega explains the spiritual symbolism of the heart in tantric literature.
32. *Gaṇeśagrahanakṣatrayayoginīrāśirūpiṇiḥ/devīm mantramayīm naumi mātṛkāṃ pīṭharūpiṇīm//* (*Nityāṣoḍaśikaṇḍa* 1.1).
33. Brahṃā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Īśvara, and Sadāśiva are depicted as the five *pretas*, the deities that undergo the cycle of time. Alternate texts begin with Indra and exclude Īśvara.
34. *Āsīnā bindumaye cakre sā tripurasundarī devī/*



*kāmeśvarāṅkanilayā kalayā candrasya kalpitottamāṣā*// (KKV 37).

35. Besides other qualities, the aspects of *dayā*, *medhā*, *smṛti*, *citi* of the deity are invoked in the fifth chapter of the *Devīmāhātmya*.

36. *Kāmākārṣiṇī*, *Cittākārṣiṇī*, *Smṛtyākārṣiṇī*, and *Dhairyākārṣiṇī* are the deities visualized in the sixteen-petalled lotus, which is worshipped in the second wheel of Śrīcakra.

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